

# Don't mess with my back yard

Silver Spring dodged a bullet this week.

A proposal before the Montgomery County Council to study whether to move the county's Park and Planning department's headquarters closer to the seat of county government in Rockville — and out of downtown Silver Spring — was withdrawn by its main backer, Councilman Michael Knapp.

With more people living along the northern reaches of the Interstate 270 corridor — in Gaithersburg, Germantown and Clarksburg, population centers are shifting, Knapp correctly argued.

Access to planners and documents would be easier in Rockville, also home base to the council, executive offices and courts. A drive from Germantown to Rockville for a Planning Board hearing is almost certainly less onerous than a trek from Germantown to Silver Spring.

And in the wake of the still-unfolding planning debacle in Clarksburg, Knapp wondered out loud if it would make sense to put all the departments, offices and agencies within easy reach. (The Prince George's arm of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission is in Upper Marlboro's county administrative building near these services.)

Knapp's idea was taken to the woodshed during a council meeting Tuesday morning.

There were worries that removing Park and Planning would be a blow to revitalization efforts, since a new headquarters is on the drawing board in a mixed-use development named SilverPlace, slated to open at the end of the decade. Another study could delay that project by two or more years.

Planning Board Chairman Derick Berlage urged the council to "respect prior decisions" and keep plans for a new Silver Spring headquarters on track, raising "cost and affordability"

concerns. Points taken.

Berlage said advances in technology have made access to planning documents online much easier, and said the board's meetings are regularly streamed and archived on the Internet. He also said there's an option to have "satellite planners" stationed in other outposts in the county. Great idea. What took them so long?

But the suggestion that moving Park and Planning would somehow hurt Silver Spring's rebound holds less water.

The central business district is back — helped by the gleaming headquarters of Discovery Communications, the Silver Theatre, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and efforts to better consolidate Metrorail, bus lines and the commuter railroad MARC. Silver Spring no longer closes at 5 p.m. when lights go off in some of the many office towers, as was the case after retailers fled 30 or 40 years ago.

The private sector has demonstrated that it can do well on its own; yes, government tenants such as NOAA and the planning agency are a boost to landlords, restaurants and small shopkeepers. Certainly a tenant the size of Park and Planning could be found for Silver Place.

At the same time, Rockville is grappling with what will happen in its Twinbrook neighborhood after the Food and Drug Administration completes its consolidation on the former White Oak Navy research base. Moving planners somewhere near the Twinbrook Metrorail station could have been a logical option.

Knapp's holistic view was valid.

Montgomery County's business communities are indeed separate and distinct, yet are part of a bigger community of nearly 1 million people. It's unfortunate the matter was dispatched so quickly and illuminates the fact the political power hasn't shifted as far north, with the population.



**Batzler on Business**

LOYD BATZLER

*Lloyd Batzler, a former business and technology editor, is editor of the Gaithersburg and Montgomery Village editions of The Gazette. E-mail him at [lbatzler@gazette.net](mailto:lbatzler@gazette.net).*